

From Knowledge to Action: Motivating Responses to Climate Change

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Abstract

There is abundant literature detailing the decline in biodiversity, the loss of wild places and habitats, and a changing climate with all the attending affects to the health and sustainability of the planet and human populations worldwide. While continued monitoring of the health of our planet is necessary, along with literature conveying the scope of the problem, there is a greater need now for solutions that motivate individuals and communities to respond willfully and optimistically to confronting the staggering challenges raised by global climate change. All too often the response to dire predictions of endangered natural resources, climatic disruption, and ecosystem collapse is a kind of shock-induced paralysis. The problem we face is not that people are unaware of, or unconcerned about the threats posed by climate change (although certainly there are such people), but rather that it is difficult to make the lifestyle changes that are needed to ensure a healthy and secure planet for future generations. This paper brings interdisciplinary literature on the problem of moral motivation to bear on the issue of motivating people to make the transition from simply knowing about climate change to consciously adopting habits and making choices that can facilitate more sustainable lifestyles.

Keywords: moral motivation, moral responsibility, akrasia

I

Climate change is still a relatively recent issue. In his history of the climate change debate, Donald Brown cites scientific studies documenting changes to our planet's atmosphere that go back as far as 200 years (2013, 21). It is only within the last 35 years however, that climate change has been subject to serious and global debate (Brown 2013, 20). While Brown downplays and in fact questions the sincerity of much of the current skepticism over climate change, it remains a controversial and contested issue.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a tremendous growth in the amount of academic, scientific, and popular literature on climate change, along with films and policy pieces. This literature details a variety of concerns affiliated with the larger issue of climate change, such as the decline of biodiversity, shrinking glaciers, rising and warming seas, more frequent and more intense storms, and others. The message has had an impact on people across the globe. A 2007 analysis by World Public Opinion of 11 international polls found that a majority of respondents considered climate change (or global warming) a "very serious" problem, and "large majorities" believed that human activity is a major cause of the problem (World Public Opinion 2007). Furthermore, the surveys demonstrated a majority of respondents in 15 of the 21 countries surveyed were in support of "'major steps, starting very soon' to address climate change" (World Public Opinion 2007).

The above mentioned study was conducted in advance of the 13th Conference of the Parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (or COP 13) in Bali. Steven Kull, the director of World Public Opinion, the organization that conducted the 2007 analysis, stated at the time, "Leaders in Bali do not need to worry that they will face a difficult job of selling their general publics on the need for action. Rather, publics around the world are signaling that they are ready to do more than their own governments have been asking them" (World Public Opinion 2007).

These 2007 polls were prior to the 2008 financial crisis that triggered the recent "Great Recession." Public support for climate change waned in the face of concerns over the financial markets. Lyle Scruggs and Salil Benegal analyzed this trend in a 2012 article and forecasted a rebound in support for climate change when the labor and financial markets regain their footing (Scruggs and Benegal 2012). A recent Pew Research survey showed that while in the United States global climate change is perceived as less of a threat—with only 40% considering it a major threat to the nation—on average climate change was perceived as the greatest threat to nations worldwide, just edging out Intentional financial instability, which was a close second (Pew 2013).

These surveys suggest that the general public is not ignorant about climate change. At this point in time, it does not seem that what is called for is more information about the threats posed by global climate changes. People appear to have gotten that message. The question then is how can we explain our slow and halting response to climate change? How can we effectively transition from knowledge about climate the dangers of climate change to effective actions to combat it?

II

Many attempts to change behavior appear to have been driven by the assumption that there is a link between knowledge and action. Conservation Psychologists Susan Clayton and Gene Myers claim, "The main principle of environmental education, as well as of many persuasive attempts, is that *knowledge* matters: people are more likely to act in environmentally sustaining ways if they understand the threats faced by the environment and the implications of their behavioral choices" (2009, 151). They refer to the work of Jody M. Hines et al, whose research found a connection between environmental knowledge and pro-

environmental behavior (1987). However, Clayton and Myers note that this connection is especially strong when there was previously low levels of awareness, but appears to taper off and perhaps reach a limit even where increased knowledge has no further impact on action (2009, 151). Concluding on this point they claim, “In the absence of clear information about the consequences of different behaviors, an intention to protect the environment will not be translated into effective action” (2009, 151).

The link between knowledge and action has been a topic under philosophical investigation since at least the time of Plato and his treatment of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*. In that dialogue, Socrates rejects the idea that someone can have knowledge of the right course of action, and fail to do it. Socrates would take issue then with the person who says, “I know I should recycle” or “I know I should walk rather than drive to work,” but fails to do these things. For no one would willingly follow the worse course of action when it is possible to follow the better course in Socrates’ opinion.¹

If a majority of the world’s population is aware of the threats posed by climate change and believes that action should be taken to confront the challenge, if Plato and environmental education experts are right, we should see more action to combat climate change. However, it seems that people do not always act on this information. Either Plato and environmental education experts have it wrong, or there is some other problem that needs to be accounted for.

Perhaps the problem is that the message on climate change has been framed as a scientific and technological problem, or an issue to be dealt with at the state level rather than the individual level. Recent work by some philosophers has sought to emphasize the moral dimensions of climate change to supplement the predominant focus on the economic, scientific, and technological dimensions of climate change. Donald Brown’s recent book does a fine job of highlighting the various types of arguments and considerations made regarding climate change, but laments that ethical arguments are often absent in climate debates (2013). Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson’s *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* shares a similar goal (2010). Here the editors note that while scientists around the globe have reached a *scientific* consensus on climate change, it has not been clear that there is a *moral* consensus on climate change. Their book brings together moral leaders from a variety of backgrounds to try to demonstrate that there is such a moral consensus.

Underlying the goal of Moore and Nelson’s text is the belief that knowledge alone is often insufficient to motivate behavior. In their introduction they claim, “No amount of factual information will tell us what we ought to do. For that, we need moral convictions—ideas about what it is to act rightly in the world, what it is to be good or just, and the determination to do what is right. Facts and moral convictions together can help us understand what we ought to do—something neither alone can do” (2010, xvii).

Moore and Nelson appear to be roughly in line with Plato’s rejection of *akrasia*. People will act if they understand the proper moral arguments. The assumption is scientific information is insufficient, but solid moral arguments are sufficient to motivate individual action. Critics of Plato’s position vis-à-vis moral motivation may take issue with this underlying assumption, which then questions the ability of this fine text to achieve its desired outcome.²

¹ See the following passages from *Protagoras*: “I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad. They know very well that anyone who does so voluntarily” 345e. “No one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better.

² William Grove-Fanning engages these authors on this point in his PhD dissertation, *Biodiversity Loss*, the

Philosophers that work to highlight the moral dimensions of climate change have been doing good work. It is true climate change has not always been framed as a moral issue, and moral arguments can have an impact on individuals to inspire them into action. It is one thing to be told that our water supply is contaminated with certain toxins, it is another to be told that we ought not to over-fertilize our lawns because doing so ultimately harms other humans and nonhumans. A good moral argument can have a greater impact on motivating action than scientific data alone. However, it seems equally true that moral arguments are not always sufficient to motivate action. David Hume is famous for his position on this issue.

Hume rejects the idea that knowledge alone is sufficient for action and claims that in addition to knowledge, an individual must also possess a desire to act. Connie Rosati claims that it “would be fair to say that Humeanism continues to be the dominant view” (2008). This is interesting, if true, given that environmental education and environmental campaigns often appear to operate under the Platonic position that knowledge is sufficient for action.

There are a number of desires that could be coupled with knowledge that could serve to motivate pro-environmental actions in the Humean conception of moral motivation—the desire to be a responsible environmental citizen, the desire to provide a healthy environment to one’s children and grandchildren are just some examples. Reporter Alan Weisman provides a startling example when he suggests that people are easily and readily motivated by the desire to advance their self-interests, so we should simply encourage individuals to follow their natural impulse to be self-interested and demonstrate how pro-environmental behavior is in fact in our collective self-interest (Moore and Nelson 2010, 32-37).

The goal of this paper is not to attempt to resolve the conflict between the positions on moral motivation as represented by figures like Plato and Hume. In fact, assuming there to be elements of truth in both positions yields practical benefits to motivating action on climate change.

III

Echoing United States President Barack Obama’s “All of the Above” energy plan that calls for action on a variety of fronts instead of targeting efforts at one specific issue, I think we need a similar all of the above plan to motivate individual citizens to confront the challenges raised by climate change. The President’s June 2013 Climate Action Plan is notable for acknowledging a “moral responsibility” to future generations and an obligation to leave them “a planet that is not polluted and damaged” (2013).

As is perhaps fitting, this plan focuses on what actions the state can take to confront climate change, the word “individual” does not appear once in the document. When scholars like Donald Brown focus on the climate change debate over the past thirty years, the focus of attention is often international meetings among state actors. While there is reason to be pessimistic about the results of those meetings, certainly negotiations at the state level are and will remain a necessary focus of strategies for confronting climate change. That would remain part of an “all of the above” strategy, what warrants greater attention however is motivating effective action among global citizens at the individual level.

The reason for the focus on individuals is that individuals, as we saw in the surveys mentioned earlier, generally are readily willing to say that climate change is a serious problem and demands a serious response. Allowing the debate to focus on government commitments to emissions reductions has the unhelpful result of taking some of the responsibility off of the hands of private individuals. We certainly ought not to abandon climate efforts at the state and international level—there are certainly things out of the hands of individuals that can be accomplished by governmental bodies, however there clearly is potential in the effects that

individuals can have on more sustainable futures if two things can happen: 1) A clear message can be crafted that tells people how they can act in ways to confront climate change and cultivate a sustainable future; and 2) Creative ways to inspire and motivate people to act on that knowledge.

We can see a change from efforts invested into top-down government and legislative action to a more bottom-up individual response to environmental problems in the life story of Aldo Leopold. In the mid to late 1920s, soon after Leopold made the move from New Mexico to Wisconsin, he became involved in the conservation politics of Wisconsin. In 1926, he was acting as a state director and serving on important committees for the Izaak Walton League (Meine 1988, 250). Working in tandem with other members of the league, Leopold worked on a bill that would appoint a “six-member unpaid conservation commission, who in turn would choose a trained director to run a new Wisconsin Conservation Department” (Meine 1988, 251). The newly elected governor, who supported the bill during his campaign, did approve the bill, which had undergone a number of revisions in the meantime (Meine 1988, 251). However, much to Leopold and other members’ disappointment, the governor turned on those who fought for the bill and used the appointments to “pay off political debts” (Meine 1988, 252). Writing to his wife, Leopold said at the time, “Apparently, we are entirely sold out and worse off than before we started. I feel pretty sick about it—especially about egging on my friends to do such a terrible lot of work for nothing” (Quoted in Meine 1988, 252). There was an initial hope that Leopold would be selected to serve as director of the newly formed Wisconsin Conservation Department, however an assistant to the newly elected governor, inexperienced with conservation matters, was chosen for the position (Meine 1988, 253). Leopold’s biographer, Curt Meine, writes that this was not only personally disappointing to Leopold, this event served to disillusion Leopold with politics (1988, 253).

One way of interpreting Leopold’s story is a rejection of top-down governmental action on conservation in favor of the development of an ethic of individual responsibility towards the health of the land. In one summative statement in his famous *Land Ethic*, Leopold claims, “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land” (1949, 221).

He had witnessed the ineffectiveness of government conservation programs in the 1930s that provided resources to farmers to implement conservation practices, only to see farmers abandon those practices once the resources vanished (Leopold 1949, 208). Without the internal change of heart required on the part of the farmers themselves, even the best government policies and programs were doomed to be ineffective. The solution to this problem, according to Leopold, lies partly in education—“education must precede rules”—but largely in cultivating a sense of ethical obligation towards the land on the part of the landowner (Leopold 1949, 209).

Leopold himself was highly knowledgeable about his environment and how it functioned. This was probably also true of many of the farmers he was directing his efforts towards. What they needed more than education was an ethic. The situation may be somewhat reversed for many citizens of developed countries today who apparently have a sense of obligation towards the environment and seem motivated to take action, but perhaps lack the understanding of ecology and how their actions and choices are related to climate change.

IV

To effectively confront the challenge of climate change we need an all of the above plan that includes continued efforts to coordinate responses at the state level, however we also need action at the level of the individual. To generate more sustainable action on behalf of

individuals, we need continued efforts that are in line with both the Platonic and Humeian approaches to moral motivation.

On the Platonic front, we need more knowledge on how to live sustainably. Moore and Nelson's *Common Ground* attempts to generate a sort of moral consensus on climate change that parallels that scientific consensus on climate change. What is lacking, in my opinion, is a consensus on what actions individuals in different locations can take to be responsible and ethical environmental citizens. We need more information on this front that could impact and be put into practice by those that are already willing to admit that climate change is a moral issue and are prepared to act on that belief.

We also need to continue to find creative ways to inspire individuals to act on their knowledge and convictions. To accomplish this goal, there are fruitful pathways to be explored by philosophers and conservation psychologists working in tandem. Too much information pertaining to climate change in the past has been close to apocalyptic, which does not appear to be the most effective way to motivate action, and in fact may have the adverse effect of resigning individuals to inaction. We need to bring climate change, which is a problem of such great magnitude, down to a smaller scale and target activities with which individuals can engage, finding ways to motivate individuals to take actions at the local and daily routine level to make meaningful changes to their lifestyle. Of course, by itself, these small changes may not constitute a sufficient response to the problem of climate change, however as a component of an all of the above plan that includes continued negotiations at the state level, it represents one way to capitalize on the apparent desire and will of individuals around the world to take action to confront global climate change.

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